

# Exploring Language Learning Beliefs of Foreign Language Teacher Students

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämä tutkimus keskittyi selvittämään, millaisia uskomuksia eräässä suomalaisessa yliopistossa opiskelevilla vieraiden kielten pääaineopettajaopiskelijoilla on kielten oppimisesta. Sen tavoitteena oli lisätä tietoisuutta kyseisistä uskomuksista, sillä ne ovat merkittävä tekijä kielten opetuksessa. Tutkimuksella oli kaksi päämäärää: (1) selvittää millaisia kielten oppimiseen liittyviä uskomuksia tutkittavilla opiskelijoilla on sekä (2) verrata tuloksia samankaltaiseen tutkimukseen, joka on toteutettu Turkissa (Altan 2006), ja kartoittaa voidaanko näitä tuloksia toistaa tai laajentaa muihin kansallisuuksiin. Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin kertaluontoisella, suljetulla verkkokyselyllä, ja siihen osallistui englannin, ruotsin, venäjän, saksan ja ranskan pääaineopiskelijoita. Analyysi kuitenkin keskityttiin ainoastaan englannin, ruotsin ja venäjän opiskelijoihin, sillä saksan ja ranskan opiskelijoita ei osallistunut tarpeeksi suurta määrää. Tulokset osoittivat, että osallistuneilla opiskelijoilla on joukko erilaisia uskomuksia kielten oppimisesta, joiden pätevyysaste vaihteli, sekä vertailtavien kieliryhmien väliltä löytyi paljon yhtäläisyyksiä, minkä osoitti uskomuksista muodostunut, hyvin samankaltainen kokonaiskuva ryhmien välillä. Lisäksi tulosten vertailu paljasti, että jokaisen ryhmän uskomuksista muodostui heille ominaisia piirteitä. Tulosten vertailu Altanin (2006) tutkimuksen kanssa toi ilmi odotettua vähemmän samankaltaisuuksia ja enemmän eroavaisuuksia suomalaisten ja turkkilaisten opiskelijoiden ja heidän kielenoppimiseensa liittyvien uskomusten välillä.</p>	
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## **Table of Contents:**

1 INTRODUCTION:.....	3
2 BACKGROUND.....	4
2.1.1 Language learning beliefs .....	4
2.1.2 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory .....	6
2.2 Previous research.....	7
2.3 Altan (2006) .....	9
3 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	11
4 DATA AND METHODS.....	11
4.1 Participants .....	11
4.2 Data collection.....	12
4.3 Methods of analysis.....	12
5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS .....	13
5.1 Difficulty of Language Learning.....	13
5.2 Foreign Language Aptitude.....	15
5.3 The Nature of Language Learning .....	16
5.4 Learning and Communication Strategies .....	17
5.5 Motivation and Expectations.....	18
5.6 Comparison to Altan (2006).....	19
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	20
6.1 Special characteristics of the students of English .....	20
6.2 Impact and Limitations.....	21
6.3 Conclusion.....	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	24
APPENDIX .....	26

## **1 INTRODUCTION:**

Shared beliefs about language learning can be encountered all over the world. Usually these beliefs are about matters such as how languages can be learned, the time it takes to learn a language, or who is good at learning them. Numerous researchers in the field of language learning and teaching have generally defined beliefs as a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning, and their true importance for language teaching and learning has only started to unravel little by little.

Earlier research on beliefs about language learning has shown that some of these beliefs held by learners can be helpful to their language learning, while others can be counterproductive (Horwitz 1995). Foreign language students may have beliefs regarding e.g. the nature of the language they study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of different learning strategies, and their own expectations about achievement (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005). As the role of language learning beliefs has become clearer, researchers have been able to acknowledge their critical impact on language learners (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005, Rifkin 2000) and their ability to impact on learners' actions and experiences of language learning (Horwitz 1999). Therefore, understanding language learning beliefs held by learners is important to understanding their learning strategies and planning appropriate language instructions.

Research in the field has efficiently gained information about the nature of beliefs held by language learners, and the findings have designated that students hold a diverse range of beliefs with varying degrees of validity dependent on factors such as the language being learned, level, and institution in which the learner studies (Horwitz 1988). Even though language learning beliefs have been researched for decades by now, there is still a lack of research that investigates the beliefs held by foreign language teacher students. Teachers' beliefs do not only influence their teaching attitudes, teaching methods, and teaching policies, but also their teaching behavior, and thereby, learner's development. (Altan 2006.) On that account, it is very important to study and gain new knowledge of what kinds of beliefs future language teachers have about language learning. This, in turn, is important when understanding students' learning strategies, planning suitable instructions, and it would help teachers to acknowledge the problems these beliefs cause better.

This research will focus on resolving what kinds of beliefs foreign language teacher major students in a university in Finland have about language learning, and its goal is to bring more awareness about language learning beliefs held by Finnish students. Originally, the research

had three aims: (1) to find out what sorts of language learning beliefs the participating students in Finland have, (2) to compare the results with Altan's (2006) study to see if his results can be repeated and expanded to other nationalities, and (3) to explore if there are any differences between men and women. However, the comparison between men and women was left out of the analysis, as the amount of male and female respondents was unequal; therefore, it would not have provided a reliable picture of the differences between them. The research was conducted with a closed online questionnaire, that contained 34 questions, with students majoring in English, Swedish, Russian, French, and German, as they can be studied as a major in the chosen university. Specifically, the research focused on students of English, Swedish, and Russian, as the other two groups did not gain enough responses to be analyzed.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1.1 Language learning beliefs**

People from all over the world seem to have somewhat shared beliefs about the ways that languages are learned. In general, numerous researchers in the field of language learning and teaching (for example: Altan 2006, Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005, Sakui and Gaies 1999) have defined beliefs as a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning, and their true importance has been acknowledged only little by little. Beliefs are also recognized to be highly dependent on context and dynamic, i.e. they can change, which means they can be mutually conflicting and vary or remain stable (Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro and Ruohotie-Lyhty 2015: 10). They have also been referred to act as strong filters of our reality (Arnold 1999, cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005).

Beliefs about language learning have been acknowledged to have a critical impact on the language learner (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005, Rifkin 2000), as they have potential to influence their actions and experiences as language learners (Horwitz 1999) either in a positive or in a negative way (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005). Second and foreign language students may have strong beliefs, for example, about the nature of the language they are studying, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of different learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement, and teaching methodologies (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005). Hence, understanding these beliefs held by the learners is essential to

understanding their learning strategies and planning appropriate language instructions, as Horwitz (1999) concluded in her earlier study.

Originally, beliefs initiated from metacognitive knowledge adopted from cognitive psychology (Kalaja et al. 2015: 9, Sakui and Gaies 1999). They were defined as opinions or ideas about aspects of second language acquisition (SLA) held by learners (Kalaja et al. 2015: 9), or as components of metacognitive knowledge, which contain all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005). It was also claimed that beliefs originated from the personal experiences of learners and from the opinions of others around them (Kalaja et al. 2015: 9), and that they were influenced by factors such as home and cultural background, peers, and individual differences (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005).

Interest in learner beliefs in language learning and teaching can be tracked back to the late 1970s, and more specifically, to discussion about the Good Language Learner (for more recent updates, see for example Griffiths 2008). At the time, it was wondered why some students are good at learning foreign languages while others struggle (Altan 2006), and it was suggested that the beliefs, among a group of other factors, played an important part in the learning outcomes of foreign language learners (Kalaja et al. 2015: 9). According to Kalaja et al. (2015: 9), it took another ten years for the term beliefs to become established after this, and for the first pioneering studies, referred to as the Classics today (Horwitz 1987; Wenden 1986a, 1987, cited in Kalaja et al. 2015), to be professionally publicized.

Language learning beliefs have been researched in various ways during the past decades. Overall, beliefs have been studied in isolation or compared between learners and teachers, or they have been looked in relation to other learner characteristics, e.g. personality, motivation, emotions (Kalaja et al. 2015: 11), with those learning foreign languages (Altan 2006). Data has mainly been collected by indirect methods, such as interviews or closed questionnaires. As a matter of fact, a questionnaire called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was designed by Elaine K. Horwitz to understand beliefs about language learning, which I will introduce in more detail later in this chapter. Nowadays, research is principally carried out along two lines, which are called the traditional and the contextual approach. Kalaja et al. (2015: 9-10) state that the first one followed the pioneers of the field with replications and adaptations of the BALLI (e.g. Kuntz 1996) or interviews inspired by Wenden (e.g. 1986, 1987, 1991, cited in Kalaja et al.). The second one, in turn, followed several crossing paths and acknowledges that “the language to be learned, being a learner, the learning process, and learning contexts are

all charged with positive or negative experiences and loaded with personal meaning” (from Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013:3, cited in Kalaja et al. 2015: 10).

### **2.1.2 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory**

In 1983, Horwitz developed a survey for identifying beliefs about foreign language learning called “The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory” (BALLI). It was created to assess opinions that students have on a variety of issues and controversies regarding of language learning. (Kuntz 1996.) By using the BALLI, researchers and teachers are able to examine and demonstrate individuality in beliefs about language learning, beliefs of groups of language learners, and similarities and differences between them (Horwitz 1999). Horwitz herself used the survey as an instrument to gather data concerning the beliefs of students who studied commonly taught languages (CTL) in the U.S. (i.e., English as a second language (ESL), Spanish, German, and French) and beliefs of ESL and CTL teachers (Kuntz 1996).

According to Kuntz (1996), there are three different BALLIs created by Horwitz in use today: a version for ESL students from 1984 and 1987, another for foreign language teachers from 1985, and a third one for foreign language students from 1988 and 1990. The research conducted in this bachelor’s thesis will be using the one designed for foreign language students. It evaluates student beliefs in five major areas: (1) the difficulty of language learning, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations (e.g. Horwitz 1999). The participants are asked to read 34 items and specify a response on a five-point Likert scale (Horwitz 1999). The analysis of data from the BALLI starts by grouping the items into the logically derived categories and by focusing on similarities and differences in response patterns within them (Sakui and Gaies 1999). A single composite score cannot be derived with BALLI, but rather descriptions of the individual items and concepts of language learning seen by the participants (Altan 2006, Sakui and Gaies 1999).

The BALLI questionnaire and the items had been designed and written very carefully with frequent consultation of language teachers and learners; however, there is no evidence of attempts either in the first or in the following uses to establish a degree of consistency or stability of responses to questionnaires on beliefs about language learning. (Altan 2006, Sakui and Gaies 1999.) Nevertheless, researchers consider the BALLI to be a competent instrument, as it was pilot tested by Horwitz among 150 first-year language students at the University of

Texas-Austin (Kuntz 1996). By the end of the 20th century, the BALLI had been used as a method in at least 13 published studies and doctoral dissertations with varying populations of students and teachers (Horwitz 1999). Since then, the BALLI has been used for example by Peacock (2001) to determine pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about second language learning, by Siebert (2003) to explore beliefs about language learning of ESL students and their teachers, and by Bernat and Lloyd (2007) to examine the relationship between gender and language learning beliefs.

## **2.2 Previous research**

As mentioned earlier, language learning beliefs have been researched for a few decades now with different focuses and research methods. Before Horwitz's research model, the BALLI, student beliefs about foreign language learning had not been analyzed systematically, and hence by using her method, many scholars have identified common beliefs about foreign language learning (Kuntz 1996). A lot of the research conducted by the beginning of the 2000's has focused on American learners of foreign languages (Horwitz 1999, see e.g. Horwitz 1988, Kuntz 1996) but also on other learning settings, such as adult learners of English in multi-ethnic communities in the USA and New Zealand, and learners of EFL in countries like Brazil, China, Japan, Korea, and Russia. With few exceptions, most of the research has investigated university-level or adult learners. (For more details, see Sakui and Gaies 1999.) According to Rifkin (2000), the most groundbreaking studies in investigating language learner beliefs have been by Horwitz (1988, 1989, 1990, cited in Rifkin 2000) and Kern (1995).

Research in the field has efficiently gained information about the nature of beliefs held by language learners, and the findings have indicated that students hold a diverse range of beliefs with varying degrees of validity dependent on factors such as the language, level, and institution in which the learner studies (Horwitz 1988). It has been recognized based on data by Horwitz (1988) that it is possible to determine a few characteristics, e.g. "it is important to repeat and practice a lot" or "everyone can learn a foreign language", for each target language group. Numerous studies have found the overall patterns of different target language groups' beliefs to be very similar to each other (e.g. Horwitz 1988, Kuntz 1996, Altan 2006), even though all groups have also contained minority groups with opposing beliefs (Horwitz 1999). Nevertheless, it needs to be recognized that in most cases, beliefs identified in one group do not automatically apply for other groups (cf. Horwitz 1999, Rifkin 2000). Several studies have also



established a connection between beliefs and other variables related to language learning, such as language learning strategies and levels of anxiety (Horwitz 1995), and since Horwitz's pioneering study in 1985 (cited in Altan 2006), it has been realized that some of the beliefs held by learners have damaging effects on their learning (Altan 2006).

In Finland, language learning beliefs have also been studied in a variety of ways. Some of the most important research in the field have been carried out by Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva, working either separately or together. For instance, they conducted a pioneering study in 2008 in a project called "From Novice to Expert", which ended up inspiring many following studies at the University of Jyväskylä (Kalaja 2015: 125, 127-128). Unlike the more international research, which has focused mainly on one-time studies of university level or adult foreign learners, in Finland there has also been truly longitudinal studies (ranging from three to fifteen years) from children to adults in their roles from beginning students to professionals. These studies are so far unique in the field, and they have made it possible to trace possible developments in the subjects' beliefs over time. The methods for data collection have ranged from interviews and narratives to questionnaires. Furthermore, the studies have not only been focusing on beliefs about EFL by learners or teachers, but also on their beliefs about other foreign languages spoken in Europe (e.g. Swedish, German, Spanish, and French). (see Kalaja et al. 2015: 5, Kalaja 127-128.)

What the studies in Kalaja et al. (2015) found, was that beliefs are related to agencies and identities, and that they are much more intertwined with each other, with emotions, and with environment than it has been thought previously. They also confirmed what literature has suggested earlier about beliefs: they can be both variable and/or stable. Furthermore, it was observed that beliefs can also develop as one interacts with others. For example, children were noticed to believe the same way as their authorities, i.e. the authoritative views were more dominant. However, over the years, the children started to develop their own beliefs and reinforce them by their own experiences mostly outside of school. By the time they reached adulthood, they had gained a deeper metacognitive awareness of their strength and weaknesses, but the core beliefs acquired in the childhood were still present. Moreover, young learners were found to appropriate the beliefs they found persuasive and ignore those that did not interest them. Student teachers and teachers in turn were noted to hold some beliefs they were doubting if they could apply in practice or not, and their beliefs sometimes underwent subtle changes in response to their experiences and interactions in school environment.

### 2.3 Altan (2006)

Altan (2006) deals with language learning beliefs of university students with foreign language majors in a study he conducted with the BALLI questionnaire in Turkey. The survey had a total of 248 respondents, who were from five different universities, out of which 74 of them were males and 174 were females. The students were from the departments of English, German, French, Japanese, and Arabic, and they were all studying to become teachers of their target language. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 40 with a mean of 22 years. 52 of the 248 students were currently in their first year, 90 were in their second year, 77 were in their third year, and 29 were in their fourth year.

As the BALLI examines students' beliefs in five different categories, I will present the most relevant results from each category of Altan's study. The first one, *the Difficulty of Language Learning*, showed that the participants overwhelmingly (84-94%) supported the concept of a language learning hierarchy, but there were big differences on the relative difficulty of each specific language. The participants were generally very optimistic about their future as language teachers, though the English group was the only one with no one disagreeing with the statement: "I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well." Regardless of these differences between the groups, the estimated amount of time required to learn a foreign language were fairly similar and related to their expected success in general.

The second category, *Foreign Language Aptitude*, which is a special ability for language learning, found a high-level of acceptance for the concept within all participants. The majority also perceived their own learning abilities as special compared to others (70-81%), and additionally, they agreed that everyone is capable to learn to speak a foreign language. In regard of common beliefs, the participants overwhelmingly complied that it is easier for children than adults to learn a new language. In contrast, two other assumptions about differential language learning abilities were not supported by the same majority. Around 58% of each group agreed that people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages, but the results were mixed when asking if women are better than men at learning languages.

The third category, *the Nature of Language Learning*, indicated that the respondents generally shared the view that learning another language is simply a matter of learning grammar rules or new vocabulary words. However, they disagreed with the statement that learning another language is a matter of translating. A great number of participants (71-90%) agreed that

learning a language differs from learning other school subjects and they were supportive of statements that indicated restricted views of language learning.

The fourth category, *Learning and Communication Strategies*, reported that the groups agreed almost unanimously that it is important to “repeat and practice a lot”. Interestingly, the English group was less intense to some degree in their support with statements related to practice and repetition. Regarding assumptions frequently associated with a communication-centered approach to language teaching, the participants from all groups had similar views: for example, most of them agreed that it is necessary to guess words in the foreign language, and they disagreed with the statement that you should not say anything until you can say it correctly. Moreover, most participants (87% or more) stressed the importance of speaking with an excellent accent, but only around 40% in each group stated that they feel self-confident speaking in the target language in front of people. Interestingly, the highest percentage for that was from the students of English.

The final category, *Motivations and Expectations*, stated that a great majority of the participants linked language skills with better job opportunities and possibilities to use the new language. When measuring the students desire to get to know the speakers of their target language, 38% of the German group disagreed and between 58-70% of the other groups agreed with the statement (English students having the highest percentage). This part of the questionnaire indicated that the participants had a strong level of instrumental motivation but a very moderate level of integrative motivation.

To conclude, the similarity of beliefs between the five different language groups is an important finding of Altan’s study. The overall pattern of responses was strikingly consistent between all groups, although most of the items drew slightly different percentages of responses, and almost without exception, each of the items drew the full range of response alternatives. The survey emphasized on beliefs held by the majority of participants, and the findings indicated that students hold a variety of beliefs with fluctuating degrees of validity. Altan’s results only present a statistic, cross-sectional view of student beliefs and the degree to which learner beliefs are variable over time. Further studies should focus on changing the survey settings.

### **3 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research focuses on resolving what kinds of language learning beliefs foreign language teacher students from a university in Finland have, and it aims to bring more awareness about language learning beliefs, as they are a remarkable factor in language teaching. More specifically, the research's aim can be divided into 3 separate goals. Firstly, to find out what kinds of language learning beliefs the participating students have. Secondly, to compare the results with a similar research conducted by Mustapha X. Altan (2006) in Turkey to see if his results can be repeated and expanded to other nationalities as well. Lastly, to compare if there are any differences between men and women's results to see if gender impacts on the language learning beliefs. However, the third goal was left out of the analysis, as the amount of male and female respondents was unequal. Hence, specific research questions can be drawn from these aims, and the questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of beliefs do foreign language teacher major students in Finland have about language learning?
2. How do the results correlate with Altan's research: are there any differences or similarities between the two countries?

### **4 DATA AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 Participants**

The research was conducted with participants who were foreign language teacher major students from one university in Finland. The questionnaire got a total of 52 responses, out of which 28 were students of English, 14 of Swedish, 6 of German, 2 of Russian, and 2 of French. Out of these participants, 12 were male and 40 female, and they were aged between 19 and 33 with a median of 26 years. Instead of focusing on only one foreign language group in this study, the questionnaire was aimed at all languages taught as a major in the chosen university, so that the possible similarities and differences between different language groups could be exposed. Moreover, the results will be compared to another study conducted with foreign language teacher students in Turkey (Altan 2006) which also had several different language groups as its targeted group.

The groups of Russian and French students were decided to be left out of the analysis, as there were only two respondents from both groups. Therefore, the data provided by these respondents would not have given a trustworthy or truthful picture of the language learning beliefs that Russian and French students have.

## **4.2 Data collection**

The data collection for this study was done through a foreign language version of the BALLI questionnaire (introduced in chapter 2), which is a closed questionnaire. To reach the target group, the questionnaire was distributed in an online form via different university mailing lists and social media groups aimed at foreign language students. The questionnaire was a one-time study, and it contained 34 different statements to measure the participants' personal ideas and beliefs about language learning in five major categories: (1) the difficulty of language learning, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations (e.g. Horwitz 1999). The participants answered all the statements by using a Likert's scale from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

A closed questionnaire, more specifically the BALLI, was chosen as a way of data collection for this study, because the results will be compared to another study that used the same method for its data collection. The BALLI has also proven to be a trustworthy and wide-ranging questionnaire that gives a truthful picture about language learning beliefs (e.g. Kuntz 1996, Horwitz 1999), which makes it a reliable instrument to gather data. This method also provided the data in a form that suits the purpose of comparing the similarities and differences between the language groups and made the process more convenient. Furthermore, the questionnaire was decided to be conducted as an online questionnaire, so that it is easier to reach the target group, and that the data is in an easily accessible and analyzable form. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 1 participant, and some necessary changes were made based on the feedback before sending the questionnaire out to the targeted students.

## **4.3 Methods of analysis**

The closed questionnaire provided quantitative data, which were analyzed by relative frequencies used for identifying response patterns within preselected categories and by

participants' target language group. This method was chosen, as it provided the data in a form that suited well the purpose of comparing different groups by producing frequencies for the five preselected categories. The analysis started by grouping the responses into these categories and by focusing on the similarities and differences in response patterns within them (Sakui and Gaies 1999) based on the participants' language. On a later stage, the results were compared to Altan's study (2006), thus, the analysis also revealed some similarities and differences between university language students in Finland and Turkey.

The results of the study are presented in percentages, showing the different language groups responses for each statement separately under their own category. Additionally, all the percentages in the analysis are rounded up to the closest full number to make the results easier to follow. These methods of analysis will thereby provide the data in a form that makes it easier and faster to interpret, and the overall patterns of the language learning beliefs can be seen with little effort. However, it is important to remember that a single composite score cannot be obtained with the BALLI questionnaire, but rather descriptions of the individual items and concepts of language learning seen by the participants (Altan 2006, Sakui and Gaies 1999), i.e. a single correct answer cannot be derived with this method but it rather provides directive descriptions of the participants' views.

## **5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **5.1 Difficulty of Language Learning**

The first category, *the Difficulty of Language Learning*, consists of BALLI items number 3, 4, 6, 14, 24, and 28, which concern the overall difficulty of learning a foreign language and specific difficulty of the respondents' target language. Item 6 assesses learner expectations for success, and items 24 and 28 measure the relative difficulty of different language skills.

The overall pattern from the language groups is very similar and supporting of the existence of the concept of a language learning difficulty hierarchy. From 66% to 86% of all the participants agree with the statement "some languages are easier to learn than others". The only exception between the groups is that 33% of the students of German strongly disagree with this statement, while the other groups disagree only up to 7%.

The data revealed some differences regarding the relative difficulty of each specific language. The majority of the students of Swedish estimate their language as easy (86%), while the majority of the students of English and German estimate theirs as medium difficulty (57% and 67%). In addition, the students of English are the only ones stating their language is very easy (11%), and none of the groups rate their language as very difficult.

The participants feel generally confident and optimistic about their own skills as language learners. The overall picture between the groups is surprisingly alike, as all the participants responded to the statement “I believe I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well” with agree or strongly agree. The most confident group is the English one with 89% stating they strongly agree, and the least confident group is the German one having only 50% stating they agree. This difference might be caused by alteration in language exposure, as the students of German are less exposed to their language than the students of English.

Time required to learn a new language was assessed next, and the estimates for this varied between under one year to a language cannot be learned in one hour a day. The most common answer to “If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?” was between 1 to 2 years among the English and the students of German (43% and 50%) and between 3 to 5 years among the Swedish students (43%). Interestingly, the students of English have the highest percentage for both ends of the spectrum (11% and 11%), while none of the students of German chose these two options.

The last two items concerned speaking and understanding foreign languages. Between the groups, big differences cannot be found in their responses to the statement “It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language”, as between 79% and 83% of the participants disagree or strongly disagree; though, small numbers of the students of English and Swedish (up to 11%) state that they agree. The groups, however, do have some differences concerning the statement “It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.”. The German group leans more towards the easier to read and write option, as 50% of them agree and 50% neither agree nor disagree, while the students of English and Swedish are more divided. 21% of both groups agree with the statement, up to 50% neither agree nor disagree, and up to 29% disagree. The differences can be caused by the fact that English and Swedish are more used and heard in Finland than German, which makes it harder for their students to speak and understand the language.

## 5.2 Foreign Language Aptitude

The second group, *Foreign Language Aptitude*, consist of items number 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33, and 34. These items concern beliefs about the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful language learners and the overall existence of specialized abilities for language learning. Hence, these items report on individual potential for achievement in language learning.

The groups' opinion about the idea of foreign language aptitude or special language learning abilities existing varies. From 50% to 57% of the groups agree with the statement: "Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language.", however, from 11% to 33% disagree with it. The results differ significantly when the participants' own special abilities for language learning were requested. Between 34% and 35% of all groups think they have a special ability to learn foreign languages, the majority of the students of English and Swedish neither agree nor disagree, and only from 15% to 28% agree. Fascinatingly, the majority of the students of German (67%) agree on having the special ability. This difference between the groups could be explained by the languages that are compulsory to study in schools in Finland: people do not feel like English and Swedish require any special skills, as they are being learned anyway, whilst German is often studied by one's own choice as an extra language.

Statements regarding what abilities knowing a foreign language brings drew interesting results. From 50% to 85% of all the groups believe that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn a new one; however, the majority of the participants (from 46% to 71%) neither agree nor disagree with the statement: "People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.". The groups are very supportive of the idea that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language, as from 79% to 86% of the respondents strongly agree with it. This, combined with the results from the previous two items, appears to indicate that the groups believe it does not require a special ability to learn a foreign language and that everyone is capable of doing so.

Statements concerning the beliefs about the characteristics of good language learners generated unexpected results. The groups are consistent in general with the common wisdom that it is easier for children than adults to learn foreign languages, as up to 85% of all groups support the idea. In contrast, none of the groups are as supporting of two other commonly encountered beliefs about differential language learning ability. Up to 57% of all groups



strongly disagree that women are better than men at learning foreign languages, and a majority of all the groups (up to 67%) strongly disagree with the following statement as well: “People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.”, and none of the students agree with it.

The statement about Finns being good at learning foreign languages yielded varying results between the groups. The majority of the English and Swedish groups neither agree nor disagree with this (57% and 50%), while 29% and 43% agree. On the contrast, the German group is more supportive of this idea, as 83% agree and only 17% neither agree nor disagree. Interestingly, only a very small part of the students of English (7%) strongly agree with this idea and none of the groups strongly disagree.

### **5.3 The Nature of Language Learning**

The third group, *the Nature of Language Learning*, consists of BALLI items number 5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25, and 26, which include several issues that deal with the nature of language learning process. Items 8 and 11 cover the role of cultural contact and language immersion on language achievement. Item 25 measures if language learning is viewed as different from other types of learning, while items 16, 20, and 26 assess the learners’ conception of the focus of language learning. Lastly, item number 5 deals with the participants’ perceptions of structural differences between Finnish and the target language.

According to Altan (2006), many people believe that learning another language is simply learning new vocabulary words, grammar rules, or translating from the target language. The participants in this study, however, do not generally share these views. They are the most against language learning being translating from the target language, as at least 86% of each group disagree with the statement. Furthermore, from 71% to 100% of the students in each group do agree that learning a language differs from learning other school subjects, and at least 78% of each group disagree with the statement “The language I am trying to learn is structured the same way as Finnish.”.

The groups have some differences between them on how strongly they believe one should know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language. Notably, the strongest support comes from the students of German, out of whom 83% strongly agree with the claim, while the students of English and Swedish share more similar results between them. The students of English support this item by 68% and the students of Swedish by 64%, while 21% of both

groups state they do not agree nor disagree. The only difference between these two groups is that the English group was the only one with strongly disagree responses (4%). Related to this item, the groups have similar results when they were asked if learning a foreign language in the foreign country is better. A majority of the participants from each group (from 67% to 79%) agree with the statement, and from 14% to 33% neither agree nor disagree.

#### **5.4 Learning and Communication Strategies**

The fourth group, *Learning and Communication strategies*, contains BALLI items 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, and 21. They address learning and communication strategies and are the most directly related to learners' actual language learning practices. Items 7, 9, 12, 13, 18, and 19 concern communication strategies, and items 17 and 21 discuss learning strategies.

With reference to traditional learning strategies, all the groups feel strongly that it is important to practice and repeat often (from 83% up to 100%). An interesting exception here is the German group, out of which 17% also stated they disagree with this item. The importance of practicing in a language laboratory is also supported by all the groups but not as unanimously as the importance of practice and repetition. From 40% to 67% of all the participants agree that it is important, but also from 21% to 33% disagree with it. The students of English and Swedish also have noteworthy percentages of students who neither agree nor disagree (39% and 29%).

The next items covered communication strategies, of which results can be useful to those who use communication-centered teaching practices in their classes. From 67% to 82% of all the participants agree that it is important to guess a word in the foreign language, and a great majority (from 86% up to 100%) strongly disagree with the statement: "You should not say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly." The majority also supports being able to make mistakes in the beginning stages of learning a foreign language, as from 50% to 64% disagree with the statement: "If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on."

The importance of speaking with an excellent accent found varying results. From 57% to 72% of all the participants disagree with the idea, and 43% of the English and 21% of the Swedish students neither agree nor disagree with it. The students of German are the only ones with noteworthy support to this idea with 34%. This difference between the groups could be a result of exposure and existence of different variations and accents that the languages have: there exists more varied forms of English and Swedish, that are also more commonly

encountered in Finland, whereas such variation cannot be found within the German language. On top of this, German is encountered less frequently in Finland than English or Swedish. These factors combined can create an idea to the students of German of the acceptable forms of speaking. In addition, majority of the students do not feel self-conscious speaking their target language in front of other people. However, there are still a considerable number of students who do: 14% of the English, 36% of the Swedish, and 17% of the students of German. Interestingly, these numbers do not seem to be in correlation to the number of students emphasizing the importance of speaking with an excellent accent.

## 5.5 Motivation and Expectations

The fifth and final group, *Motivation and Expectations*, consists of BALLI items 23, 27, 30, and 31, which concern opportunities and desires that the participants associate with the learning of their target language.

A vast majority of the participants are optimistic about their opportunities to use the language they study if they learn to speak it well (at least 66% in every group), and they associate their language skills with better job opportunities. In both cases, the students of Swedish are the most optimistic, followed by the students of English. The students of German, in turn, are the most pessimistic about both items, as they have a notable number of students disagreeing (up to 33%). Furthermore, from 50% to 70% of the participants believe that Finns think it is important to learn foreign languages. In this case, the students of English and German are the most positive and share strikingly similar views, while the students of Swedish have a significantly bigger percentage of participants neither agreeing nor disagreeing (36% in comparison to 18% and 17%).

The participants' desire to get to know the speakers of their language was requested next, which purpose is to measure the integrative motivation of these groups (Altan 2006). The overall results between the groups are unexpectedly similar, as at least 66% of each group agree with the statement: "I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better.", and none of the groups strongly disagree with it. The Swedish group, however, has a significantly higher percentage of strongly agree responses with 57% of the participants stating that, while only 32% of the students of English and 33% of the students of German feel this way. This could be explained by Sweden's geographical proximity and by the language's

history and official status in Finland, which can give the students of Swedish a more concrete motivation to learn their target language.

## **5.6 Comparison to Altan (2006)**

The analysis of the results revealed similarities in all the five different categories that the questionnaire was divided into. In the first one, it was discovered that the students in both studies agree to a very similar extent that some languages are easier to learn than others. They also share almost the same view of their own prognosis and success as language learners and about the time that is required to learn a new language. In the second and third category, it was found that the students share the belief that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language, and they all strongly believe learning a language differs from learning other school subjects. Furthermore, both studies showed the students disagree that learning a language is simply translating. The fourth category revealed a shared view of the importance to practice often and to guess a word if you do not know it. Moreover, the students in both studies disagree that you should not say anything until you can say it correctly. Lastly, the final category revealed that the groups are optimistic about their opportunities to use the language they study, associate their language skills with better job opportunities, and believe to a similar extent that people from their country are good at learning languages.

The analysis of the two studies revealed more differences than originally expected, but only in the first four categories. In the first category, both studies revealed differences between the groups about the relative difficulty of each specific language, however, the differences between them were not the same. In this study, none of the groups rate their language as very difficult to learn, while in Altan's study, 26% of the students of English and 66% of the students of German believe so. Also, 70% of the English language students in Altan's study feel that English is an easy language to learn, while only 29% state so in this one.

The second category uncovered some of the most interesting differences found in the participants beliefs. In Altan's study, the groups generally endorse the idea of foreign language aptitude or special language learning abilities existing, while in this one, the views vary between the groups. The results were very similar considering the statement if some people are born with a language learning aptitude, but there were big differences in the participants' estimates of their own aptitude. For example, in this study, only 11% of English students agree having a language learning aptitude, when in Altan's study, 70% of them believe so. To continue, in both

studies, a great majority of the groups support the belief that children learn languages easier than adults; however, noteworthy differences emerge between the other two common beliefs. In this study, up to 57% of the participants from all groups strongly disagree that women are better than men at learning languages, while around 58% of each group agree in Altan's study. Up to 67% of the students in this study also strongly disagree that people who are good at math and science are not good at learning languages, while in Altan's study, 62% of the English and 53% of the French students agree with it.

The third and the fourth category brought up some intriguing differences regarding the nature of language learning and strategies for communication. The students in Altan's study believe that learning a foreign language is mostly learning new vocabulary words or grammar rules, while the students in this study disagree with this. The groups in Altan's study also feel that it is not good for beginning students to be allowed to make errors, as it is hard to get rid of them later, while in this study, the groups support the idea. The importance of speaking with an excellent accent also differed: in Altan's study, all the groups stress the importance of speaking with an excellent accent, while in this one, the majority of the participants do not see it as important. Lastly, the students in Altan's study are less confident about speaking their language in front of other people than the students in this study: at least 40% from each group in Altan's state they feel self-conscious, while the majority in this one feels confident.

The reasons for the found differences between the groups can be many. The most likely factors behind them, however, can be the participants themselves and their nationality, culture, educational background, and how these factors relate to the language they study. In addition, the time that has passed between the studies, 13 years to be exact, can have an impact as well. A bit over a decade is enough for attitudes and values of people to change and develop, which in turn shapes the society and its structures. This development also looks very different in the two countries the questionnaires were conducted, Finland and Turkey.

## **6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Special characteristics of the students of English**

In this part, I am going to take a deeper look into the special characteristics, that were revealed by the analysis, of the students of English in comparison to the students of Swedish and German.

This is done by paying closer attention to the differences that emerged between the groups within the results section.

The examination of the first category revealed that most of the English students feel that their language is of medium difficulty, and a small portion of them see it as very easy, making the students of English the only group to state so. The students of English are also the most confident and optimistic group about their own skills as language learners. Interestingly, they are also the only group that was strongly divided in their belief whether it is easier to read and write in their language than to speak and understand it. Additionally, the second and the third category revealed that the students of English are divided in their belief whether Finns are good at learning languages or not, but they lean more toward the positive end of the spectrum. The majority also believes that one should know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language. Furthermore, the students of English are the only group with a small percentage of strongly agree responses in both cases.

The fourth category showed that the students of English are more undecided about the importance of speaking with an excellent accent than the other two groups. They generally also do not feel self-conscious speaking their language, and they have the lowest percentage of students stating they do. The fifth category, on its behalf, discovered that the students of English are one of the most positive groups when they had to assess if Finns think it is important to learn languages.

Based on this look into the special characteristics of the students of English, it can be said that the similarities between the language groups exceeded the differences, even though differences could be found in all the five categories. The overall picture of the beliefs that the groups hold, turned out to be rather similar, however, when differing beliefs did appear, they could be vastly different between the three groups and even within a group. Therefore, it seems that all the three groups have their own, slightly differing, special characteristics in their beliefs about language learning.

## **6.2 Impact and Limitations**

The presented study has some limitations, which are the uneven size of the compared groups and the relatively low number of participants. The conducted research is also first of its kind to focus solely on foreign language teacher students and their language learning beliefs in the university it took place, as the BALLI questionnaire has not been used there before. Due to

these limitations, the results provide only a preliminary look into the beliefs of the foreign language teacher students in a Finnish university. Therefore, the research topic needs further investigation with the same focus, more respondents to validate its findings, and further research in other universities in Finland as well. However, since Kalaja et al. (2015) for example have studied language learning beliefs, but with a different emphasis, this is not the first study to examine language learning beliefs in a Finnish university. Therefore, there is some base to which the results can be compared to. Regardless, I believe that the findings of this study broadened the earlier knowledge of language learning beliefs in Finland, and they may provide some basic data and a comparison point for future research specifically about the language learning beliefs of foreign language university students.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The conducted research focused on exploring language learning beliefs that foreign language teacher students in a university in Finland have. Its goal was to bring more awareness about these sorts of beliefs, as they are a remarkably important factor in teaching and learning languages (e.g. Altan 2006, Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005), by being the first study to be conducted with the BALLI questionnaire in the chosen university. The research's aim was to find out what sorts of language learning beliefs the participating foreign language major students have, and to compare the results with Altan's study (2006) to see if his results could be repeated and expanded to other countries as well.

On one hand, the presented findings suggest that the students hold a range of beliefs with varying degrees of validity, e.g. "I believe I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well." and "It is important to practice and repeat often.", fitting the findings of Horwitz (1988) seamlessly. The present findings also demonstrated that there are a lot of similarities between the language groups, as the overall picture of their beliefs remained remarkably consistent, which in turn, supports the earlier findings made e.g. by Horwitz (1988) and Kuntz (1996), but it also seems that all the three groups have their own, slightly differing, special characteristics in their beliefs about language learning. However, since this research emphasized the beliefs held by the majority, it is important to point out that differing beliefs did appear, and most of the items drew a variety of different responses.

The comparison of the results to Altan's study (2006), on the other hand, revealed less similarities and more differences in the language learning beliefs between the two countries

than originally expected. Some of the most striking differences appeared, for example, on the students' estimates about their own language learning aptitude (11% agree on this study and 70% agree on Altan's) and about the belief that women are better than men at learning languages (up to 57% strongly disagree on this study and around 58% agree on Altan's). On that account, it can be argued that this presented research managed to discover many separate beliefs held by the participating students and language groups and to identify some differences and similarities they hold.

As beliefs about language learning have been acknowledged to have a critical impact on the language learner (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005, Rifkin 2000), understanding these beliefs held by the learners is crucial to understanding their learning strategies and planning appropriate language instructions (Horwitz 1999). The findings of this study indicate that pre-service teachers, i.e. the participants, come to learn languages with preconceived notions of how to do it, matching the findings of Altan (2006). Therefore, foreign language teacher educators and future foreign language teachers should not ignore these beliefs.



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## APPENDIX

The statements used in the questionnaire.

1. Lapsien on helpompaa oppia vierasta kieltä kuin aikuisten.
2. Joillain ihmisillä on luonnostaan erityinen kyky, joka auttaa heitä oppimaan vieraita kieliä.
3. Joitain kieliä on helpompi oppia kuin toisia.
4. Kieli, jota opiskelen, on:  
1 = erittäin vaikea, 2 = vaikea, 3 = keskivaikea, 4 = helppo, 5 = erittäin helppo.
5. Kieli, jota opiskelen, on rakenteeltaan samankaltainen suomen kielen kanssa.
6. Uskon, että opin lopulta puhumaan pääaineena opiskelemaani kieltä erittäin hyvin.
7. On tärkeää puhua vierasta kieltä erinomaisella aksentilla.
8. Voidakseen puhua vierasta kieltä, on tarpeellista tuntea siihen liittyvää kulttuuria.
9. Vieraalla kielellä ei tulisi sanoa mitään ennen kuin sen osaa sanoa oikein.
10. Jonkun, joka osaa jo puhua vierasta kieltä, on helpompaa oppia toista.
11. On parempi oppia vierasta kieltä maassa, jossa sitä puhutaan.
12. Jos kuulisin jonkun puhuvan kieltä, jota opiskelen, menisin heidän luokseen, jotta voisin harjoitella puhumista kyseisellä kielellä.
13. Jos ei tiedä jotain sanaa vieraalla kielellä, voi yrittää arvata.
14. Jos joku käyttäisi tunnin päivässä kielen opiskeluun, kuinka kauan kestäisi, että hänestä tulisi sujuva puhuja? 1 = alle vuosi, 2 = 1-2 vuotta, 3 = 3-5 vuotta, 4 = 5-10 vuotta, 5 = kieltä ei voi oppia opiskelemalla yhtä tuntia päivässä.
15. Minulla on erityinen kyky oppia vieraita kieliä.
16. Vieraan kielen oppiminen on lähinnä monien uusien sanastojen oppimista.
17. On tärkeää toistaa ja harjoitella usein.
18. Olen vaivaantunut puhuessani pääaineena opiskelemaani kieltä muiden ihmisten edessä.
19. Jos sinun annetaan tehdä virheitä alussa, niistä on vaikea päästä eroon myöhemmin.
20. Kielen oppiminen on pääasiassa kielioppisääntöjen opettelemista.
21. On tärkeää harjoitella kielistudiossa.
22. Naiset ovat parempia oppimaan vieraita kieliä kuin miehet.
23. Jos puhun pääaineena opiskelemaani kieltä erittäin hyvin, minulla tulee olemaan paljon mahdollisuuksia käyttää sitä.
24. On helpompaa puhua kuin ymmärtää vierasta kieltä.

25. Vieraan kielen oppiminen eroaa muiden kouluaineiden oppimisesta.
26. Vieraan kielen oppiminen on pääasiassa sen kääntämistä suomen kielestä.
27. Jos opin puhumaan pääaineena opiskelemaani kieltä erittäin hyvin, se auttaa minua saamaan hyvän työpaikan.
28. Pääainekieltäni on helpompaa lukea ja kirjoittaa kuin puhua ja ymmärtää sitä.
29. Ihmiset, jotka ovat hyviä matemaattisissa aineissa eivät ole hyviä oppimaan vieraita kieliä.
30. Suomalaisten mielestä on tärkeää puhua vieraita kieliä.
31. Haluaisin oppia pääaineena opiskelemaani kieltä, jotta voin oppia tuntemaan sen puhujia.
32. Ihmiset, jotka puhuvat useampaa kuin yhtä kieltä hyvin ovat erittäin älykkäitä.
33. Suomalaiset ovat hyviä oppimaan vieraita kieliä.
34. Jokainen voi oppia puhumaan vierasta kieltä.